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ABSTRACT

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Perceived Altruism as a Function of Consistency and Distinctiveness

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Abstract

An analysis of perceived altruism was conducted within the framework of Kelley's (1973) attributional model. In a 2 by 2 factorial design, the consistency and distinctiveness of a donor's prosocial history were manipulated.

Subjects were provided with written scenarios depicting the work of a voluntary welfare organization aiding the elderly. Subsequent evaluations of the donor-actors on the altruism dimension revealed that there is a direct relationship of consistency and an inverse relationship of distinctiveness with the attribution of altruism.

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Perceived Altruism as a Function of Consistency and Distinctiveness

Leeds (1963) defined altruism as an act which is: (a) beneficial to at least one other person, (b) emitted voluntarily, and (c) not motivated by the donor's expectations of achieving rewards for himself. In order to avoid the insoluble problem of establishing the real or unconscious intentions of the donor and thereby presenting proof against a hedonistic assumption about the nature of man, researchers have adopted the more neutral term of prosocial or helping behavior to refer to voluntary beneficial acts which do not have an obvious or direct selfish purpose. Despite this scientific hedging on an ancient philosophical issue, it must be remembered that naive observers (i.e., nonpsychologists) often do label acts and/or persons as altruistic. Clearly, not all prosocial behavior would be considered altruistic by naive observers. Hence, it is a problem of person perception to establish the conditions under which such a label is applied.

Jones and Wortman (1973) suggested that prosocial behavior directed toward a person of higher status is often perceived as ingratiation. All else equal it might be presumed that the same beneficial action directed toward a peer would be perceived as altruistic. These predictions were confirmed by Thompson, Stroebe, and Schopler (1971). They found that the donor was perceived as more selfish and was evaluated more negatively when the recipient was of higher rather than of equal status.

Kelley (1973) has classified attribution principles into two categories: those that apply to single observations and those that are relevant to multiple observations. Thompson et al. tested the former case. The present study was designed to examine the perceptions of naive observers who had information about the consistency and distinctiveness of an actor's history of prosocial behavior. Of course these principles of Kelley's model of causal

analysis have not been linked to specific motives attributed to the actor or (to say it another way) to the labels applied by the observer. Intuition suggests, however, that a person who engages in frequent prosocial behavior would be perceived as more kind and altruistic than one who reveals a history of inconsistent prosocial conduct. Actually, inconsistent behavior should lead the observer to make an environmental attribution for the actor's behavior. It is less obvious what effect distinctiveness should have. Suppose that an observer knows that the actor has opportunities to choose over situations and time among a number of people all of whom need help. If the actor tends to help one person but no one else, the observer is likely to wonder why the aid is given so discriminatively. A suspicion that the actor has a hidden selfish motive may develop. On the other hand, if the actor makes his help nondistinctive in the sense that his pattern of helping does not discriminate between those who need it, he is more apt to be perceived as not having any selfish motive; his generosity seems more noncontingent.

The above considerations suggest that consistency and distinctiveness would interact with one another. When observations reveal that an actor's prosocial behavior is consistent, he would receive a credit toward altruism but if it was also distinctive he would lose credit; the same canceling out effect should occur when the history of observations reveals a pattern of inconsistent though nondistinctive helping. Strong attribution of an altruistic intention should occur only when the information received is that the behavior was both consistent and nondistinctive. These predictions were tested in a 2 by 2 factorial design in which both consistency and distinctiveness were manipulated.

Method

Subjects.

Eighty undergraduate males and females were randomly assigned to the four experimental conditions. To explore sex differences, ten of each sex were assigned to each condition.

Procedure.

In a mass testing session students were asked to read what was alleged to be a recent article published by a local newspaper on the work of a community organization aiding the elderly. The article was favorable and suggested that the organization needed financial help to continue their good work. The students were then given four charts. Each chart was in the form of a 13 x 13 matrix and depicted the activities of a volunteer associated with the community organization. The four volunteers were only identified as Mrs. A, B, C, and D. Column headings designated the months of the year and row headings designated twelve of the elderly who were aided. The thirteenth row and column presented totals for months and visits to each person over the year.

In the consistency conditions the donor was depicted as either making frequent visits in most every month (71 to 79 visits) or as making few (9 to 10 visits). Two volunteer charts presented a highly consistent volunteer and two depicted a rather infrequent and inconsistent volunteer. In each of these consistency conditions one of the volunteers showed a pattern of helping all of the twelve elderly persons and the other volunteer showed a pattern of helping only one of them; the former represented nondistinctiveness and the latter distinctiveness. Thus, each chart represented a specific condition of the experiment.

After perusing all of the charts subjects were asked to rate one of the

volunteers (which one depended of course on the subject's cell assignment) on a set of polar adjectives following the format of the semantic differential (Osgood, Suci, & Tannenbaum, 1957). Four items provided a measure of the connotative meaning dimension of evaluation and four items measured potency. Other polar adjectives included: altruistic-selfish, intentional-unintentional, free-constrained, benevolent-malevolent, amicable-hostile, friendly-antagonistic, and consistent-inconsistent.

All items were seven point Likert scales (from +3 to -3). Included as manipulation checks were two questions directed to assess subjects' perception of consistency and distinctiveness in terms of the frequency and the discriminatory properties of the visits.

Results

Analyses of the manipulation checks for consistency ($F = 140.037$; $df = 1/71$; $p < .001$) and distinctiveness ($F = 85.425$; $df = 1/72$; $p < .001$) showed that the experimental treatments produced the intended effects.

Since sex did not have any effect on any of the dependent variables either by itself or in interaction with the other factors (all p's > .05), sex was collapsed and 2 x 2 ANOVAs were performed. On the major variable of perceived altruism a main effect of distinctiveness was found ($F = 21.02$, $df = 1/74$, $p < .001$); subjects in the distinctive conditions rated the actor as less altruistic ($\bar{X} = .308$) than did subjects in the nondistinctive conditions ($\bar{X} = 1.769$). The predicted interaction was also significant ($F = 6.01$, $df = 1/76$, $p < .017$). As can be seen in Table 1 the Duncan multiple range comparisons revealed that the volunteer in the consistent-nondistinctive condition was perceived to be more altruistic than any of the other volunteers.

Other ratings of the actors were significantly affected by the consistency variable. As can be seen in Table 2, the actor in the consistency

conditions was rated as more potent, friendly, intentional, free, consistent and as evaluatively more positive than the actor in the inconsistency conditions.

Similarly, the distinctiveness variable significantly affected the ratings given to the actors. The actor in the nondistinctive conditions was rated as more potent, amicable, friendly, benevolent, free and as evaluatively more positive than the actor in the distinctiveness conditions.

Implications and Conclusion

The results lend empirical credence to Kelley's attribution model as it applies to perceived altruism. In a situation where observers had information about an actor's history of helping others through a community welfare organization, both the distinctiveness and consistency of the actor's past prosocial behavior affected perceived altruism. An interaction of these two factors showed that an actor was rated as most altruistic when his helping behavior was consistent (frequent) and not confined to a particular other person. The data indicated that distinctiveness provided a stronger cue for the labeling by subjects than did consistency information.

Consistency information apparently provided subjects with cues about the intentionality of the prosocial behavior. Subjects who were provided with consistency information rated the actor as more intentional, potent, and free. As might be expected the more frequent prosocial acts in the consistency conditions led observers to rate the actor as more friendly and as evaluatively more positive.

When the actor restricted his prosocial behavior to a particular person over time he was perceived as less free and less amicable, friendly, benevolent and potent; the nondiscriminating actor was also rated evaluatively

more positive. Apparently, observers must assume there is some causal factor that leads the actor to restrict his help to a particular other person. Since there is no information given to them about the need of the potential recipients of the help (in this case the aged on welfare), the reason must be specific to the particular individuals involved. Hence, it is reasonable to infer that the actor in the distinctiveness condition was perceived to have some personal motive for helping a particular person. This kind of discounting would lead the observer to be suspicious that the actor had a hidden selfish reason for helping. When the help was nondistinctive observers were prone to perceive the actor as altruistic even when the behavior had been inconsistently performed in the past.

The results of this study reinforce Kreb's (1970) argument that research must examine the attributional determinants that lead naive observers to label an action as altruistic and that this person perception problem is not coextensive with the current research on helping behavior.

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Table 1

Means for the Interaction Effect on the Altruism Ratings of the Actors

Experimental Conditions			
Consistent-Distinct	Consistent-Indistinct	Inconsistent-Distinct	Inconsistent-Indistinct
$.158_{bd}$	2.421_{a}*	$.450_{cd}$	1.150_{c}**

Means with different subscripts are significantly different from each other. (Duncan range tests).

*p < .001
**p < .05

Table 2

Summary of the mean differences in ratings of the actors as a function of consistency and distinctiveness

Dependent Variable	Consistent	Inconsistent	Distinct	Indistinct
Potency	1.395*	-.750	-.154	1.128*
Friendly	1.816*	1.275	1.180	1.898*
Intentional	1.676*	.500	1.133	1.057
Free	.784*	.053	-.106	.921*
Evaluative	5.730*	3.553	3.553	5.730*
Amicable	1.447	1.150	.949	1.641*
Benevolent	1.379	.936	.710	1.568*
Consistency	3.218*	-.050	1.100	2.068

*$p < .01$